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Why Independence? The Instrumental and Ideological Dimensions of Acehnese Nationalism

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When the conceptual language of nationalism is applied to a particular political conflict, the intention is not just to use the concept to illuminate the case, but also to employ the case as an aid to reflecting on, and hopefully refining, the concept. With this dual focus in mind, the paper uses the separatist dispute between Aceh and Indonesia, to discuss three issues. First, it suggests that the instrumentalist explanation for separatist nationalism, as a rational response to relative deprivation and exploitation, fails to explain the intransigent element in demands for independence. Second, it argues that such absolutism can be explained in terms of the ideologising impact of social disruption. Third, it relates this instrumentalist-ideological distinction to the interplay of civic and ethnic nationalisms in order to elucidate the nature of Indonesia’s national integration problems.

1. THE QUESTION ABOUT ACEH:

By the late 1990s ethnic unrest and regional separatism in Aceh, East Timor, Papua, Ambon and elsewhere in Indonesia, meant that ‘one of the most striking features of the contemporary crisis... was the speed with which the regime-level crisis of Suharto’s New Order was transformed into a crisis of the nation-state itself’ (Aspinall and Berger 2001:1004). The unrest was widely interpreted as an explosive reaction to the authoritarian centralisation of the Suharto regime.

Subscribing to this view, the post-Suharto governments of Habibie, Wahid and Megawati began implementing, from 1998 onwards, various measures to reduce authoritarian centralisation. The 1999 decentralisation laws announced a significant shift of government functions and revenues to the regions- partly to the Provinces but primarily to the Districts. Then in 2001 the Special Autonomy laws for Aceh and Papua (18 and 21/2001) were passed. These provisions granted revenue allocations significantly greater than those under the decentralisation laws, and in the case of Aceh, they also provided for the implementation of Sharia law. The Indonesian government thus fulfilled the demands for Provincial and Islamic autonomy which had been made by previous generations of Acehnese nationalists (Aspinall 2003: 50). Revenue allocations to Aceh meant that ‘the provincial government (was) suddenly awash with funds’ (Aspinall and Crouch 2003: 3), although some of these were apparently used to finance military operations.

Acehnese expectations of concessions from Jakarta had increased following President Habibie’s 1999 agreement to a referendum on East Timor’s independence, his offer of ‘special autonomy’ to Aceh, his apology for human rights abuses in Aceh by the TNI (the
Indonesian armed forces), and then President Wahid’s apparent agreement to hold an Acehnese referendum. These expectations were manifested in mass demonstrations for a referendum in Aceh, and in the escalation of support for the ‘Free Aceh Movement’ (GAM), which renewed its attacks on military and police targets. Wahid initiated peace talks with GAM in late 1999, with the aim of ending the violence and securing its acceptance of the special autonomy package. The initial outcome was a ‘Humanitarian Pause’ signed in May 2000, but this broke down and was replaced in December 2002 by a ‘Cessation of Hostilities Framework’. This agreement collapsed in May 2003. Jakarta responded by immediately imposing Martial Law and launching a new military campaign (Aspinall and Crouch: 6-45).

According to Malley, the collapse of peace talks was because ‘GAM viewed the (autonomy) law as the starting point for future talks, while Jakarta saw it as the end point’ (Malley 2003: 140). Aspinall and Crouch indicate that ‘the post-1998 governments made substantial concessions’ to Acehnese demands (:2), but that GAM maintained a ‘hard-line position’ (:4). Negotiations collapsed partly because the Indonesian military (TNI) repeatedly undermined them, and partly because GAM perceived them as a sign of Indonesia’s impending collapse. The deep distrust between Jakarta and GAM meant that the breakdown of autonomy negotiations were perhaps ‘to be expected’, and might require little in the way of explanation other than letting the chronological facts of Aceh’s fraught relationships with Jakarta speak for themselves. But ‘common sense’ deserves problematising.

It has frequently been observed that the current phase of Acehnese rebellion, since its revival in the 1980s, differs from that of the 1950s and ‘60s, in that the goal of the earlier rebellion was a ‘better deal’ within Indonesia, whereas the present goal of GAM is that of complete independence from Indonesia. The simplest way to explain such a shift of goals from regional autonomy to independence would be to see it as merely a tactical change. In the 1950s, it seemed, to many Acehnese that the best hope of gaining resource benefits for the region and the right to practice its own brand of Islam, was to pressure Jakarta into giving it special autonomy within Indonesia. But when Jakarta repeatedly broke its promises, the calculation accordingly changed as to how best to achieve these benefits. Independence would thus be preferred to autonomy because it now offered the best chance of promoting the economic development of the region and achieving good governance. The politics would still be the same, that of ‘rational cost-benefit’ calculations as to the best way to promote the interests of the Acehnese.

But Ockham’s Razor needs to be used carefully. Our understanding of the Acehnese issue has recently been greatly enhanced by a series of studies published by the East-West
Center Washington (Aspinall and Crouch 2003; Schulze 2004; Sukma 2004). They offer careful accounts of the recent peace process and its collapse, the structure of GAM, and the impact of Jakarta’s security operations in Aceh. In the process, they help to illuminate the motivations both of the GAM leadership and of the wider Acehnese population, concerning the goal of independence.

The December 2002 pact offered the prospect for ‘an internationally monitored demilitarisation of the territory to be followed by a dialogue “reflecting the views of all elements” of Acehnese society and finally ‘a free and fair electoral process”’. The pact faltered when ‘GAM refused to compromise on its demand for Independence’ (Aspinall and Crouch 2003: x).5 GAM was willing to take this stance in the knowledge that Jakarta would renew its military operations, and that GAM did not have the capacity to militarily defeat Jakarta. They did this partly because ‘GAM leaders believe deeply in an ethos of blood sacrifice. They are confident that the suffering visited upon the Acehnese population as a result of military operations will be so heavy that it will swell future popular support for independence’ (Aspinall and Crouch 2003: 52). As Rizal Sukma notes, GAM does indeed seek an end to socio-economic hardships and to problems of corrupt and inefficient government in Aceh, but there is also another factor at work: Jakarta’s ‘use of brutal military repression since 1990 has inflicted a deep sense of trauma among Acehnese’ (Sukma 2004: 5). This has ‘planted seeds of hatred’ and ‘deepened Acehnese resentment’ (Sukma 2004: 36). GAM insists on independence therefore, as Kirsten Schulze notes, not as a means to an end, but ‘from a position of principle and absolutes’ (Schulze 2004: 56). There are two absolutist principles: independence is due to Aceh because it is an authentic ethnic nation in contrast to the ‘nonsensical Javanese fabrication’; and it is due because freedom from Jakarta’s violence is a democratic human right (Schulze 2004: 6-10).6 The absolutist element in GAM’s position on independence is thus recognized and is seen to relate to Aceh’s treatment by Jakarta. Nevertheless it is not treated in these three studies as a central issue warranting specific explanation.

Most discussions of the Acehnese struggle intermix two languages of politics. They explain it as a conflict of interests between Jakarta and Aceh – a struggle over oil and natural gas resources, patronage, or political power; but also as a moral conflict – a fight based on mutual hatred and resentment, a fight for liberation from trauma and oppression. It is of course useful for political actors to ambiguously mix both these languages- of material self-interests and of moral principles - in order to maximise the mobilisation of support; but the two languages are not really compatible as bases for analysis. Either we explain the
behaviour of political actors in terms of ‘rational self interest’ calculations which are then
legitimated by moralistic rhetoric; or we explain them in terms of ideological adherence to
the moral absolutes which then shape perceptions of interest. We may decide to employ
different explanations for different political actors or for the same actors at different times,
but we should not conflate the two languages of explanation if we wish to be analytically
coherent.

2. THE QUESTION ABOUT ETHNIC NATIONALISM:

Aceh is frequently cited as an ethnic nationalist rebellion. This term indicates that it is a
political movement which mobilises support and legitimates itself both internally and
externally by claiming that Aceh is the homeland of the Acehnese nation – a community of
common ancestry with its own language and its own distinctive religio-culture.7

Globally, there has been an upsurge of ethnic nationalism since the 1960s, often in the
form of ethnic minority movements against existing nation-states. The main avenue for
explanation has been the development of various theories denoted by the term
‘instrumentalism’. From this perspective an ethnic identity, such as Acehnese, is explained as
the consciousness clothing for the ‘rational self-interests’ of an interactive social network
bounded by territorial contiguity and perceived cultural affinity. When economic or power
disparities between classes or regions are perceived as partially coinciding with linguistic or
cultural differences, elites seeking to ameliorate relative deprivation or maintain relative
advantage, diagnose the disparities as arising because of the cultural differences, thus
granting those cultural attributes political and moral significance as markers of ethnic identity
(Hechter 1986). As the structure of economic or power disparities changes, so therefore does
the ethnic consciousness. This instrumentalist approach has thus been able to explain why
ethnic groups claiming to be organic communities of fixed cultural boundaries and common
ancestry, could turn out, on investigation, to be recent communities with fluid boundaries
arising from new economic and political situations. But instrumentalism does not thereby
undermine the legitimacy of ethnic nationalist movements, since it endows them with the
liberal virtue of rational self-interest. If ethnic minority movements against the state are
explained as rational self-interest movements of the economically exploited and the
politically marginalised, then their claim to the right of ‘self-determination’ might meet with
more approval than if it were simply based on primordial ethnic instincts.8
This instrumentalist approach to ethnic nationalism fits in well with a widespread instrumentalist depiction of Indonesian politics as dominated ‘from the village to the palace’ by the pragmatic, self-interested pursuit of material resources and political advantage. This perspective is manifested in the frequent designation of the social structure and political culture in patron-client terms, and in designations of the state as dominated by personalist factions and neo-patrimonial rule (Jackson 1978). It is further reflected in the influential ‘political economy’ approach to Indonesian politics, which sees political power as the means for the pursuit, by individuals, interest groups or class groups, of their economic interests (Rodan, Hewison and Robison 2001). This instrumentalist interpretation of Indonesian politics also helps to explain the emergence of ethnic rivalries, and of ethnic nationalist movements. In countries such as Indonesia where much of political and social life functions on the basis of patron-client networks, national integration depends significantly upon the interweaving of these networks. To the extent that the patrimonial state functions as a mega-patron able to distribute resources down the chain of patron-client linkages to those at village level in the various regions, Indonesian national integration might be maintained. But once the state begins to distribute patronage in an ‘internal colonialist’ or nepotistic way so as to favour some Javanese clienteles, the danger arises that some patronage networks outside Java begin to be, and to feel, excluded from the flow of resources, and to develop corresponding loyalties and antipathies.

From this instrumentalist perspective then, ethnic conflict occurs where competing self-interested elites find it useful to mobilise their respective clienteles on communal lines of language, religion, race or homeland territory. Calls for ethnic autonomy should then be understood as essentially bargaining demands for increased access to state patronage. This is how the Acehnese rebellion of the 1950s and ‘60s has sometimes been portrayed, as a struggle by Aceh’s new ulama elites to gain access to patronage as Provincial officials (Brown 1994 Ch.4, Morris 1985). When some provinces became resource-rich, as was the case after the discovery of oil and gas resources in Riau, Aceh and East Kalimantan, and the mining of minerals in Papua, such separatist demands could be revived, as the extent of their exploitation by the state, but thence also their bargaining power against the state, increased further. From this perspective, contemporary Acehnese separatism was generated by Jakarta’s internal colonialism, as ‘many elites in Aceh began to perceive the vast difference between the contribution made by Aceh to Indonesia’s development, and the input by Jakarta back into the province itself. The benefits of the oil boom in the late-1970s and early-1980s
Applying this instrumentalist approach, Samantha Ravich (2000) sees four different 'constituency blocs' supporting the Acehnese rebellion, each with different grievances against Jakarta; with 'those pressing for economic parity with the central government' comprising a significant element. Ravich sees the enhanced powers and revenues of the Districts as 'a step in the right direction (which) will appease many in the economic constituency' (:15-16). She further argues that for this economic constituency, 'instability in the province thwarts their ambitions for greater affluence.' She concludes that 'as a result of these concerns, many in the economic constituency would like to find an equitable financial arrangement with Jakarta and remain part of the Republic' (:16). Ravich recognises that some members of GAM are committed to full Acehnese independence, but suggests that its more moderate members, together with those pressing for religious freedom, those seeking an end to military repression, and the 'economic constituency', would probably be willing to be 'co-opted' by appropriate accommodations from Jakarta, and by a federalist solution, were these to eventuate (Ravich 2000: 18).

There is no doubt that some ethnic nationalists, in Aceh as elsewhere, make their decisions on whether to demand independence, or to negotiate for more decentralisation, on calculations of interest advantage, while clothing their actions in the rhetoric of morality. However, there is clearly the possibility that the experience of continued exclusion from the state's patronage networks, and the continued failure of ethnic nationalist bargaining demands, leads some ethnic elites and their followers to become increasingly disillusioned with the state. They then begin to calculate that a rejection of the limited power and resources offered by the state might constitute a better strategy, in that it might enhance the prospects for a collapse of the state and for the attainment of full political autonomy, and thence full control over the power and resources of their province.

But once cost-benefit calculations come to be based to a significant extent on feelings of fear and distrust, which engender collectivist prejudicial stereotyping of the Other, so that in this case the state comes to be perceived as intrinsically the distrusted agency of an alien Javanese community, the politics of ideology begins to dominate over the politics of interest. The pursuit of moral certainty becomes more central to political behaviour than the defence of material interests. The two aspects of behaviour do indeed go together, in that self-interests are always perceived in terms of value preferences; nevertheless, there are clear differences throughout other parts of the country were contrasted with the living standard of the Acehnese population.' (Wilson 2001: 4. See also Ross 2003)
between those political actors who prioritise the pragmatic pursuit of material interests, and those who adhere to moralistic principles which begin to inhibit such pragmatism.

There is no suggestion here that ‘the Acehnese’ have suddenly and collectively shifted from the pursuit of material interests to an adherence to a morally absolutist view of politics. But if, as seems likely, there are contemporary disagreements amongst Acehnese elites and in different sections of the wider Acehnese society, as to how to proceed in relation to Jakarta (Robinson 2001: 230-231; Schulze 2004: 19-24) then these differences may be related not simply to factional rivalries, class divisions, or cultural variations, but also to differences in political consciousness which can function independently of such structures.

Ethnic nationalism is sometimes, but never solely, an instrumental tool for the pursuit of material advantage. When myths of common ancestry are employed to legitimate and to mobilise support for material interests, then they are so employed precisely because they have the capacity, for elites as well as for masses, to change perceptions of self-interest, to modify the identity of the collectivities involved, and to add a moral dimension to political contention. Once political contentions take an ethnic form, the perception of the conflict as one between the moral Us and the immoral Other has the capacity to act as an independent causal factor so as to deepen and potentially to change, political confrontation. The instrumentalist approach does little to explain this moral dimension to political conflict, and recent constructivist discussions of ethnicity and nationalism are in part a response to this gap in the literature.

The constructivist approach begins with the assumption that individuals pursue goals relating to moral and ideological considerations, as well as material and power interests, and then suggests that the way in which these latter interests are perceived is itself determined by the construction of moral and ideological goals. Constructivism seeks to examine, therefore, how collective moral identities, in this case ethnic and national, are constructed in the course of social interactions. Ethnic or national identities are depicted as flexible because they arise in the interplay of social dynamics, rather than being fixed either through attachment to the 'cultural givens' or through attachment to ‘objective’ interests generated by situational givens. Identities are indeed always in process of being constructed in the imaginings of discourse, rather than being ascribed or pragmatically invented, so that they emerge and mutate in the dynamics of social intercourse. Ethnic and national groups can thus be seen as ‘moral communities’ (Yeros 1999: 123) engaged in contestation as to the moral identity of the Us and, particularly in the case of oppressed ethnic minorities whose identities are constructed in part reactively, the moral identity of the Other.
But the countervailing insight is that some of these constructions can become 'sticky' or 'sedimented over time' (Norval 1999: 84), so that they begin to act as ideological blinkers inhibiting further flexibility of identity construction. Some constructions of the Us and the Other become widely adopted and 'sedimented' because they offer cognitive and moral clarity to individuals experiencing cognitive and moral confusion. In the extreme case, ethnic identities come to be cemented as an exclusivist and morally absolutist nationalism, which defines the self by reference to a morally pure ethnic 'us', besieged or threatened in some way by impure or inferior ethnic others. Complex historical and contemporary situations can thus be reinterpreted in simplistic terms as a struggle between two stereotypes, the virtuous Us and the demonised Other. The fact that participants, and in some cases observers, might regard such a simplistic and moralistic construction as 'common sense', merely reflects the potential emotional power of this ideological formulation.

Constructivism remains an unsatisfactory analytical tool, however, until the factors which promote or inhibit such ideological sedimentation are identified. The ‘modernist’ literature on the rise of the nation-state offers a clue. One recurrent argument, variously formulated, was that the disruption of traditional societies by the forces of modernity, uprooted individuals from their communities (Deutsch 1966; Gellner 1983). This engendered an *anomie* which could be resolved by the reimagining of a synthetic *gemeinschaft*, offered either by ‘authentic’ nationalist movements seeking territorial statehood, or by ‘artificial’ territorial states portraying themselves as organic nations. The ideology of nationalism offered a sense of identity, permanence and significance to disorientated individuals. It also offered a moralistic diagnosis and prescription for the otherwise incomprehensible disruptions of modernisation. Nationalism provided certainty by re-imagining the disrupted interactive community as the mythical idealised community, the nation, whose historical or potential purity had been damaged, such that it must be rebuilt.

This argument that the disruptions of the modernisation process constituted a rite of transition which reached its peak by the mid-twentieth century, has largely given way to the argument that the disruptive impacts of globalisation are enduring, and have become increasingly politically salient since the 1970s. The coinciding of the upsurge in ethnic nationalism with the deepening of globalisation, might then be explained in terms of the shift from pragmatic instrumental ethnic attachments to ideological and absolutist nationalist attachments, which occurs when interactive communities are disrupted by the diverse cultural, economic and political changes associated with globalisation. But such a link
between ‘social disruption’ and ethnic nationalism needs specifying if it is to offer a usable theory. The following four propositions make a start in this direction:

First, the disruption of the interactive communities within which individuals invest their material interests, at locality level or beyond, needs to be sufficiently intense and widespread to generate a reservoir of mass anomie and fear which can be resolved by ideological myths of certainty, offering a simplistic diagnosis of contemporary disruptions. Nationalism offers one such diagnosis. The disrupted society is imagined as the historical or potential nation which has been contaminated by the Other, whose removal is therefore imperative.

Second, the disruption is such that incumbent elites within the interactive community, and/or aspiring elites, are no longer able to legitimate their claims to leadership in the community by appealing to either their previous positions of patronage in the interactive networks, or to their previous positions of authority. Such displaced elites not only seek a simplistic explanation of their displacement and the disruption of their community, they also seek new ideological bases for establishing legitimate authority. Nationalism offers one such legitimation. Collective memories and aspirations are reinterpreted by elites either as ethnic myths or civic visions, so as to embody the claim that they are the sole articulators of the national will.

Third, when the disruption occurs in the context of disillusionment with the benefits accruing from development, such that faith in progress towards a future utopia is weaker than is nostalgic faith in the possibility of return to an lost idyll, those seeking the resolution of contemporary disruptions are more likely to locate them in ethnic myths of an idealised past. But when disruption is accompanied by a perception that the alien and disruptive Other is on the verge of collapse or defeat, so that hopes of developmental progress begin to revive, then resolution can be imagined in civic myths of an idealised future.

Fourth, relative deprivations relating to economic and power disparities can contribute to nationalism in two ways. Firstly, such disparities between interactive communities are frequently linked with social disruptions within an interactive community, because of their association with such potentially dislocating processes as migration, rapid economic change, and the escalation of state restrictions on autonomy. It is not the disparity between communities per se which generates the nationalist reaction, it is the consequent dislocation within the Us community. Secondly, relative deprivation situations provide a useful candidate for ideological demonisation in the form of the simplistic argument that the existence of
material disparities between two political collectivities constitutes, of itself, proof of intentional discrimination or exploitation of the one by the other.

These propositions would lead one to expect, overall, that those sections of Indonesian society which have experienced the most disruption of their interactive communities and authority structures, would be those where ethnic nationalist ideologies have taken most hold. This would remain true whether the disruptions were caused by rapid social change and migration, by the negative impacts of economic globalisation and state economic policies, or by coercive interventions at the hands of the state. Ethnic nationalism might therefore be expected to take a more absolutist form in those ethnic minority communities like Aceh, Papua and Ambon, where socio-economic transformations and state intervention has been most disruptive and intense. It also emerges amongst downwardly mobile Santri Islamic groups seeking ‘certainty in a seemingly incomprehensible world’ (Barton 2001: 249). Elsewhere, in those cases where state interventions have been less disruptive, the moralistic language of ethnic nationalism may still be employed, but more to promote rather than to replace the pragmatic pursuit of interest advantage.

Various accounts of the Acehnese conflict concur in seeing the change from the renegotiation of integration to the demand for independence, as indicating a shift from a concern with material interests to a concern with moral absolutes which derives in some way from the experience of economic exploitation and ‘sanctioned terror’ (Chauvel 2001: 155). Aspinall and Berger suggest that this has generated a deep distrust of Jakarta, such that ‘many Acehnese nationalists mock the very concept of Indonesian national identity as inherently absurd and unstable, a mask for Javanese colonialism.’ Independence is thus sought as a ‘liberation from fear’ (Aspinall and Berger 2001: 1024, note 66, 1017). Robinson examines how ‘the institutionalisation of terror’ in Aceh provoked a widespread and deep hatred of the New Order, and generated new disruptions in the society which ‘ensured a rapid escalation from resolvable political disagreement to widespread violence and political conflict’ (Robinson 2001: 226 and 239). Such accounts confirm that there is a shift from the politics of bargaining to the politics of absolutist confrontation which occurs as some ethnic nationalists begin to develop stereotyped perceptions of the state as immoral. This is what their experience teaches them, and it begins to influence, rather than merely to reflect, their interest calculations.

Karim Crow quotes Aguswandi, a student leader of the Student Solidarity for Aceh People (SMUR) on this topic. Crow offers a vivid account of how the traumatic experiences of military repression in Aceh have generated ‘increasingly popular cohesion and solidarity at
every level of society’ (:3), in a ‘peaceful confrontation of (sic) the state’ (:6). The Acehnese community is described as morally pure; ‘The strengths of the Acehnese people derive both from their Islamic culture and history: courage, idealism, a nobility of aims, solidarity in oppression and for the oppressed, and a conviction of the justice and rightness of their cause’ (:7-8). By contrast the enemy is depicted as immoral; ‘Their deep sense of violation of Islamic values and humiliation of Acehnese dignity’ is expressed in ‘the bitter feeling of Acehnese toward Javanese generally’ and in the contemptuous reference to troops ‘as sipa-i ('Dutch 'slaves' or 'bandits’)’ (:6). This implies a strategy of non-cooperation with the 'enemy', and Karim Crow quotes Aguswandi, a student leader of GAM on this: ‘There is no more bargaining room left... and the people have already awakened. The voice of the people is the voice of God’ (:13).

Crow’s depiction of contemporary Acehnese nationalism as based on a predominantly Islamic nationalist ideology is challenged by several observers of the main nationalist movement, GAM, who depict it as increasingly secular. GAM did indeed initially (in the 1970s and ‘80s) have some similarities in the character of its leadership and goals with the 1950’s Darul Islam movement, but since the late 1990s in particular, the goal of Islamic autonomy has been replaced by the goal of a separate Acehnese statehood, justified primarily by reference to its pre-colonial territorial status as an independent ethnic homeland (Aspinall 2003). This shift from a movement for Islamic autonomy to a movement for ethnic homeland independence has coincided with the shift of Indonesian governments in a more Islamic direction. There may be various reasons for the shift of direction by GAM, including the concern of GAM leaders to gain international support (Aspinall 2003; Schulze 2004: 8-10); but it is clear that as Indonesian governments gained the support of some Acehnese ulama, and then implemented measures for Islamic autonomy, Islam ceased to offer an appropriate language for constructing the contention with Jakarta as an absolutist clash between virtue and vice, in a way which would be morally and cognitively comprehensible to the traumatised society and its dislocated elites. No doubt for some Acehnese actors, the shift from a focus on Islam to a focus on homeland sovereignty remained a tactical one to facilitate the pursuit of material interests by appealing to a new audience. For others however, the change in the content of the stereotypes reinforced and reconfigured the discourse of moral confrontation between the virtuous Us and the demonised Other.

There are similar debates about the development of moral absolutism amongst Papuan nationalists. Prior to the fall of Suharto, leadership differences, geopolitical divisions and ethno-linguistic diversity within the province had contributed to disagreements on the
separatism issue. Subsequently however, according to Aspinall and Berger, the ‘strong revulsion’ against the Indonesian atrocities generated a response of ‘open defiance’ which has in turn generated a new ‘sense of Papua-wide ethnic identity’ (2001:1015). The trauma of violence shifts political consciousness, away from the pursuit of diverse interests, and towards a shared absolutist nationalist ideology constructed on myths of Papua's Melanesian ethno-racial distinctiveness. But the extent of this change of consciousness is unclear. Nordholte suggests that elite opinion is divided, and that the repressive policies of Indonesia lead some to demand ‘a better Indonesia rather than a separate Papua’, while others are beginning to ‘fight for a (Papuan) state based on a mainly racial and religious concept of Papuan ethnicity’ (Nordholte 2001:31).

The trend towards ideological absolutism was also noted in the ethnic conflicts of the Muloccas in 1999, both amongst Ambonese Christians, and amongst Laskar Jihad Muslims who justified their attacks on Christians as the defence of Islam and of Indonesia, on behalf of a lapsed state (Davis 2002; Turner 2002). Nils Bubandt has argued that constructions of conspiracy which mobilised each side in Moluccan conflicts, can only be understood as the politics of paranoia (Bubandt 2002).

There is, in other words, widespread recognition that marginalised interactive communities embrace ethnic nationalism on the basis of pragmatic interest calculations, but then that disrupted and traumatised communities begin to embrace ethnic nationalism for different reasons, on the basis of absolutist ideologies. This analytical distinction, between instrumental and ideological perceptions of politics, refers of course to polar positions on a continuum rather than a dichotomy, so that shifts from one to the other are a matter of degree. But if we were to assume that all ethnic nationalists act instrumentally in pursuit of their self-interests, differing only in the extent to which they camouflage their instrumentalism in the rhetoric of moralistic ideologies, then it would be difficult to explain why political actors facing similar situations, react so differently - some bargaining for advantage, others refusing to do so.

The suggestion that Acehnese demands for independence might derive partly from an ideological rather than just from an instrumental perception of politics, does not of itself imply any evaluation of whether or not Acehnese secession is justified. There are two dominant forms of argument in favour of secession, those which posit a liberal right to self-determination on the part of a civic community formed through ties to its territorial political institutions, and those which justify it where the community concerned constitutes a homogeneous ethnic nation in its own homeland, seeking rectification of injustice (Lehning
1998). In the former case, the argument for secession depends primarily on the idea of individual voluntary consent (implying ‘rational choice’ calculations), while in the latter case of an ascriptive community, it depends more on the extent of the shared experience of traumatic injustice which is to be rectified. Thus the depiction of nationalists as having either instrumental or ideological perceptions of their political conflict might indeed influence how we would argue the case for their right to secession, on self-determination grounds in the former case, and on collective injustice grounds in the latter, but it would not of itself determine whether or not we would support their claim.

It should nevertheless be noted that there is an interplay between the instrumental-ideological distinction, and the difference between the ethnic and civic bases for political community. Just as political communities like Indonesia and Aceh might contain some instrumentalist and some ideological nationalists, so might they also contain some ethnic nationalists and some civic nationalists. A brief examination of the relationship between these two dimensions of nationalism might illuminate the extent of Indonesia’s ‘crisis of the nation-state’.

3. THE QUESTION ABOUT CIVIC NATIONALISM

The suggestion that social disruptions can generate a shift from the politics of pragmatic instrumentalism towards the politics of absolutist ideology, and that this helps to explain the weaknesses of national integration in Indonesia, at least as regards Aceh, remains problematical until there is some explanation of the role of Indonesian civic nationalism. Attempts at democratisation are often accompanied by assertions of ethnic majority rights and by assertions of ethnic minority rights against that majority. But so long as, and to the extent that, these countervailing ethnic demands are buffered by the growth of a liberal civic vision of the nation-state as the guardian of individual rights and equal citizenship, then threats of ethnic conflict and nation-state disintegration are ameliorated. It seemed initially as if this is what was happening in Indonesia in the late 1990s, as various sections of Indonesian society experienced anomic disruptions at the hands of the Suharto regime, culminating in the experience of the 1997 economic crisis, so as to predispose them to absolutist nationalist ideologies. The fall of Suharto was quickly accompanied both by the emergence of new Islamist parties, and by the separatist demands of several ethnic minorities. But it was the ideological vision of a liberal civic Indonesia espousing equal individual
citizenship rights which seemed initially to be the loudest voice, shouted by the students who led the overthrow of Suharto in May 1998.

Subsequently however, this upsurge of Indonesian liberal-individualist civic nationalism (in reaction to the authoritarian-collectivist ideology of Suharto), proved short-lived and limited in scope, failing to effectively mobilise the wider Indonesian society. The explanation seems to be that there was a deep ambivalence in Indonesian society towards the Indonesian state. On the one hand there was a widespread disillusionment with its capacity to function as an agency of developmental progress and social justice. On the other hand there seems to have been a widespread confidence that the state-focused patronage networks which had been disrupted by the collapse of Suharto’s patrimonial regime, would soon be rebuilt. Both these perceptions of the Indonesian state combined to inhibit the mobilisational power of the liberal civic nationalist vision articulated by the anti-Suharto students and both need some discussion.

Civic nationalism offers an ideological vision, able, potentially, to mediate and to buffer the tensions between divergent ethnic nationalisms. Regionalist rebellions during the earlier Sukarno period were often seen as reflecting disagreement as to whether the Indonesian state should have a secular or an Islamic basis, but as Aspinall and Berger have commented, ‘a strong commitment to national unity survived across the political spectrum’ (Aspinall and Berger 2001: 1006). This commitment to national unity can be understood as the faith of all parties in civic progress; the hope that both secularists and Muslims, the ethnic core as well as the ethnic peripheries, could at some future date be accommodated as equals within a civic Indonesia. But this ‘civic glue’ weakened during the Suharto regime, and eroded further as the economic collapse of 1998 dramatised the regime's betrayals of the civic goal.

Benedict Anderson has described this Indonesian civic nationalism as ‘a deep horizontal comradeship... tied to visions and hopes for the future’ which developed during decolonisation, among inhabitants of the Netherlands East Indies (Anderson 1999: 2). He suggests that faith in this ‘common project was destroyed by ‘the pervasive practices of sadistic brutality’ which since 1965-66 ‘have become “normal” activities of the police and military men at the lowest levels’ (:4). One result was the growth of ethnic separatism in Indonesia, particularly in Papua and Aceh. Anderson notes that in the past, ‘no Acehnese I’ve heard of ever had aspirations for an independent Aceh’. But this was changed by the atrocities of the Suharto regime, so that by the late 1980s, this goal suddenly became popular,
‘because more and more Acehnese were losing any hope and confidence that they had a share in a common Indonesian project’ (63).

This erosion in faith that the Indonesian state could promote the civic nationalist vision did not just develop amongst ethno-regional minorities. The transgressions of the regime's promises of equal citizenship and social justice, also led some marginalised Javanese and Muslims to seek the ethnic alternative to civic nationalism. In particular, when Suharto’s accommodations to Islam were apparently undermined in 1997, by the widening gulf between the corrupt wealth of secular elites and the sudden downward mobility of the Islamic majority, some disaffected and marginalised Muslims sought refuge in visions of an Islamic Indonesian nation.

But any such trend from a civic vision of Indonesia, to an ethno-religious vision of Indonesia, was itself weakened by the corrosive impact on both ideological nationalisms, of Indonesia's endemic patron-client politics. It quickly became clear, after the fall of Suharto, that political transition in Indonesia was to be characterised more by the restructuring of old patronage networks, than by their eradication (Robison and Hadiz 2004, Ch.9). Hope in progress towards the liberal civic vision of equal citizenship proved less powerful than did the hope that some discredited unresponsive patrons would be removed and replaced by patrons promising to be more responsive to previously marginalised clienteles. Thus the students whose demands for equality of citizens were so influential in precipitating Suharto's fall, have not proved to be influential actors in the subsequent politics of transition. It should not be surprising that democratisation primarily took this form if we accept the view of various commentators that patrimonialism had its roots more in the patron-client basis of Indonesian culture and social structure, than in the corrupt nepotistic behaviour of a particular regime (Brown 2004).

Most Indonesians seem, therefore, to have resolved the insecurities arising from the disruptions of their communities of interaction in the late 1990s, by seeking to rebuild patronage networks. Both in the 1999 and 2004 elections, it seems likely that the widespread support for Megawati’s secular PDI-P, for Golkar, and for Wahid’s PKB, has been partly based on the widespread expectation that they would function as patronage machines. In Indonesia therefore, the clash between radicalised ethnocultural nationalism (demands for an Islamic state) and radicalised multiculturalist nationalism (ethnic minority demands for ethno-regional secession) has been ameliorated, not by the upsurge of a strong civic nationalism, but rather by the resurgence of patrimonialism. In this sense, patron-client
networks, together with their associated corruption and nepotism, still help to hold Indonesia together.

But not in the case of Aceh, where it seems that the relationship between civic nationalism and patrimonialism is reversed. The Acehnese students (and NGOs) who articulated liberal civic nationalist ideals from 1998 onwards, did not have to try, like their Javanese counterparts, to convince their followers that the Indonesian state could be transformed, instead they could mobilise support by portraying Aceh, not Indonesia, as the focus of their civic vision. Instead of portraying the Acehnese community in linguistic, religious and racial terms as an ethnic community of common ancestry, they have therefore portrayed it primarily as a territorial community of equal citizens irrespective of ethnicity. Moreover, this civic vision could more easily resonate at mass level in Aceh because of the impact of human rights abuses, and also because of the perception that Aceh had never gained full access to the patron-client networks which had their focal point as the Indonesian state, and was unlikely to do so. The weak prospects for progress through unequal patron-client relationships therefore reinforced the appeal of a civic Acehnese nationalism promising the vision of equal citizenship rights. Contemporary Acehnese nationalism thus has a strong civic component.

The implication is that Acehnese nationalism – the claim that the Acehnese are one people with one common will - is, like several other nationalisms, espoused not only by a mix of pragmatic instrumentalists and absolutist ideologues, but also by a mix of those imbued with an ethnic vision of their separatist community, and those imbued with a civic vision of it. This mix of ethnic and civic nationalism in Aceh is in part a source of strength and unity, as Acehnese political elites combine and intertwine both visions for purposes of mass mobilisation and international, as well as domestic, legitimisation; but to the extent that Acehnese elites are themselves divided between ethnic nationalists and civic nationalists, Jakarta might more easily play them off against each other.

CONCLUSIONS

This discussion has an implication for the prospects of federalism in Indonesia. To the extent that Acehnese and other separatist activists have begun to think in ideological rather than instrumental terms, their nationalism functions as a moral absolutist blinker predisposing them to see the Indonesian state as a tool of Javanese or Islamic domination, so that its concessions will be perceived as fraudulent, even if they are intended as genuine. Thus a
policy initiative such as federalism would be distrusted and rejected, as either a ‘divide and rule’ trick, or as a symbol of a collapse of the state in the face of secessionist pressures which therefore must be sustained. Instead of federalism offering a way of widening the appeal of the civic vision of Indonesia, it would more probably be perceived both at the centre and in the regions in Indonesia, as a threat from the ethnic Other.

But the main purpose of this paper has been to use the case of Aceh as a focal point for suggesting that nationalism – the belief that we owe greater ethical obligations to members of our nation than to other human beings - appears in two forms. Its first form is as the instrumental defence of the interactive community within which we invest our interests, its second is as the panacean ideological formula which we construct for the resolution of our moral insecurities. It is not that there are two different nationalisms- since the contents of the instrumental and ideological attachments are similar, but rather that nationalism plays a very different role for those inhabiting functioning interactive communities, than for those inhabiting disrupted communities.
The term ‘New Order’ was employed by the Suharto regime (1966-1998) to distinguish itself from the earlier Indonesian government of Sukarno.

This paper refers at various points to the work of Edward Aspinall, who is the leading commentator on contemporary Acehnese politics. Aspinall made insightful comments; and Crawford Young provided a helpful critique of an earlier version.

Most discussions of Acehnese rebellion distinguish two main phases: first the post-1953 attempt to gain provincial status as a ‘special region’, in association with the Darul Islam movement; second, the GAM rebellion of the late 1970s. After its suppression, GAM’s re-emerged in the late 1980s, and was suppressed again. After Suharto’s removal in 1998, it re-emerged once more. On the history of the Acehnese conflict see Kell (1995).

Note in particular the assessment that ‘If GAM had been willing to abandon its independence goal it is likely that the government would have been prepared to amend the (special autonomy) law’ (Aspinall and Crouch 2004: 26).

The phrase ‘nonsensical Javanese fabrication’ is quoted in Schulze from Hassan di Tiro, the ‘commander’ of GAM (Schulze 2004: 7).

In practice of course, Aceh is not an ethnically pure community, being about 75% ethnically Acehnese. But as a territorial community in which linguistic minorities cluster around the majority ethnic homeland core, such that these minorities are both marginalised by that ethnic core, but also assimilating into it, then it conforms to the generally accepted understanding of an ethnic (or ethnocultural) nation.

The term ‘primordial’ refers to the argument that the power of the ethnic bond is either (i) ineffable, (ii) is explained by the ‘germ of truth’ in the myth of common ancestry, and the carrying of this germ in the collective memory of the group, or (iii) is understandable as an inherent genetic tendency towards ethnocentrism (Horowitz 2002).

Crawford Young indicates how the process of ‘sedimentation’ might begin. ‘Once a threshold is reached, the consciousness may become to a degree self-reproducing at a group level, but continue to be contingent for the individual, who remains engaged in an ongoing process of transacting and redefining identity’ (Young 1994: note 7: 79-80).

But not the only diagnosis. Today its main competitor is religious fundamentalism; in the recent past, communism.

Whereas instrumentalism depicts nationalist elites in Machiavellian terms, cynically employing nationalist myths in pursuit of their elite self-interests, this constructivist formulation implies that the nationalist myths articulated by elites are subscribed to by these elites because the ideologies offer comprehensible explanations of, and resolutions to, the erosion of their authority.

It has been estimated that between 2000 and 5000 Acehnese were killed during the 1990s (Wilson 2001).

The civic dimensions of this claim for territorial statehood are discussed below.

The main organisational framework for this was the Centre for Information on the Aceh Referendum (Sentra Informasi Referendum Aceh: SIRA) established in 1999 to campaign for a referendum on independence.

The terms ‘genuine’ and ‘fraudulent’ refer to the discussion of this issue in Anderson (1999). On federalism in Indonesia, see Ferrazzi (2000).

For a discussion of these types of responses to the state in the case of Papua, see Kivimaki and Thorning (2002).
REFERENCES


